

# CONSERVATION Showcase

## New Mexico NRCS Program to Protect Expiring CRP Acres

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Kenneth Walker, NRCS East Area Conservationist

Pressures such as higher commodity prices are being placed on producers to take Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) fields out of grass and put back into production. Many CRP fields are set to expire within the next four years. There is a growing concern among conservationists about the amount of land that will stay in the CRP. The **New Mexico Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)** is taking an innovative approach to stem the flow of CRP fields going back into crop production, while at the same time helping ranchers by using farm bill programs not normally associated with CRP.

The cap for New Mexico's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres in Curry, Quay and Roosevelt counties is decreasing from 35 percent to 25 percent of each county's cropland. This revision is causing many of the CRP acres to expire from the program starting in 2010, which is a concern for the NRCS. To combat this 10 percent reduction on top of the regular expiring acres and to continue to protect these expiring CRP acres, the New Mexico NRCS has created the New Mexico Grass Banking Pilot Program.

This pilot program will be available to all New Mexico areas with excess CRP grass beginning in 2009. Plans call for a three-year program phased in as CRP acres expire, and contracts to enter the pilot program can be written with landowners one year prior to their CRP expiration date.

"We want to provide an avenue to keep the CRP land in grass to let the native grass rest to benefit wildlife and prevent soil erosion," said Kenneth Walker, area conservationist with the New Mexico NRCS.

To be eligible, the landowner of the expiring CRP must contract with a rancher in the same county to allow livestock to graze the expired CRP acreage. A benefit to ranchers is the opportunity to rest their private grassland. The program offers ranchers the opportunity to evaluate the benefits and effects of a planned grazing system without any risk or cost as well as provide an opportunity to establish a documented grazing history. The benefit to the farmer is a continued incentive payment, though reduced from regular CRP rental rates, somewhat offset by any financial arrangement with the rancher.

Conservation practices used on the expiring CRP acreage would address local resource concerns and facilitate the implementation of prescribed grazing. These conservation practices, such as building fences and addressing water issues on the CRP land would be eligible for cost-share assistance for landowners through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). These practices will maintain and enhance the conservation benefits on this acreage. The goal is to have expired CRP acreage remain as grassland and not return to cropland.

Participation in the program reduces the grazing pressure on native grazing lands and improves wildlife habitat by invigorating grass stands, increasing forb and insect populations. Ranchers also will be encouraged to rest their grass for a 10-month cycle. All this provides improved nesting for many bird species.

"This unique program is a great way to get ahead of the curve by addressing the projected loss of CRP in New Mexico," said Christopher Rustay, conservation delivery leader for Playa Lakes Joint Venture. "It not only benefits both farmers and ranchers in New Mexico but also grassland birds and their habitat. It shows what's possible when creative minds that know the farm bill are tasked with solving a conservation concern."

Plans are underway to hold informational local working group meetings this year with landowners and ranchers to outline the new program and its benefits to encourage enrollment in this unique program.

Information about the program will be promoted in local newspapers as well as Soil and Water Conservation District and Farm Service Agency newsletters. The incentive payment to the participating CRP landowners has not yet been determined but will be finalized this year.

Contact **Kenneth Walker** to find out more information about the New Mexico Grass Banking Pilot Program.